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RE-BRANDING GAUDIYA VAISHNAVISM: BHAKTIVINODA THAKURA AND THE RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE OF 19TH-CENTURY BENGAL

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Introduction – Religious Markets in the Study of Religion

The relationship between the “marketplace” and “religion” has long vexed scholars of the latter. Guided by the interpretive spirit of the phenomenologist, Mircea Eliade, academic religionists have been traditionally wary of using the idea of the “market” to assist in our understanding of religion. As Eliade once famously quipped: “To try to grasp the essence of [a religious phenomenon] by means of . . . economics . . . or any other study is false; it misses the irreducible element in [religion] —the element of the sacred.”¹ But if historians of religion like Eliade have been overly cautious to avoid economicistic reductions of religion to more and other elementary phenomena, social scientists have not proven so circumspect. I would argue that this lack of circumspection has proven, or can prove, beneficial to historians of religion. Scholars such as Peter Berger, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel De Certeau, Maurice Bloch, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge have all utilized the conceptual language of the marketplace in order to come to better understandings of religion as a humanly produced and negotiated phenomenon.²

In his universally lauded work, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger was one of the first to apply the logic of market forces to the sphere of religious activity. One of Berger’s great contributions to the study of religion was his recognition of the fact that religious ideas and behaviors could be regarded as commodities—acquirable and exchangeable—and that, therefore, religious institutions might be profitably regarded as entrepreneurial enterprises.³ Berger’s insights into the underlying economic logic of religious production and exchange arose out of his critical engagement with the questions of religious modernization in a post-Enlightenment and post-industrial era. Berger was particularly inter-

ested in coming to an understanding of the activities of religious institutions in the twentieth century, a period characterized by the pressures of secularization as well as the increasing interaction and confrontation of world religions with one another. Berger understood that, particularly after the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, the major religious systems of the world had come into ever closer contact, particularly in the west.⁴ As Asian religions came westward and the evangelical and revivalist movements of the late nineteenth century gained footing, particularly in America, the old protestant "high churches" found themselves under increasing pressure to accommodate themselves to new ways of thinking and acting in order to retain parishioners. Berger theorized that the changes taking place among religious institutions in the west, including Vatican II, represented predictable and logical responses to the challenges posed by modernity.

In his classic work, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger developed his idea that the religious changes underway in the mid-twentieth century could be best understood if one considered the religious sphere of cultural activity to be governed by the same principles of market logic that governed the economic sphere. Berger recognized that in any pluralistic context, religious institutions must adapt and modify in order to meet the demands of the consumer base. When new religions are introduced into a static context the older religious institutions are forced to recognize that they are in a new marketing situation. Berger writes: "It is not difficult to see that this situation will have far reaching consequences for the social structure of the various religious groups. What happens here, quite simply, is that the religious groups are transformed from monopolies to competitive marketing agencies. Previously, the religious groups were organized as befits an institution exercising exclusive control over a population of retainers. Now, the religious groups must organize themselves in such a way as to woo a population of consumers, in competition with other groups having the same purpose. All at once, the question of 'results' becomes important. In the monopolistic situation the socio-religious structures are under no pressure to produce 'results' – the situation itself predefines results."⁵

I would argue that Peter Berger is quite right in his suggestion that religions are, in many important respects, bound by the same rules of supply and demand which characterize other spheres of human cultural activity. In fact, one might argue that, not only are religions bound by these rules (within a pluralistic context anyway) but that this knowledge is not solely the preserve of late twentieth-century sociologists of religion. In certain cases leaders of religious institutions have been well aware of the internal market logic which structures their activities in a pluralistic setting.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura and the Marketplace of the Holy Name

Bhaktivinoda Thakura, the great Vaishnava reformer/revivalist of the late nineteenth century, was one such religious practitioner who was well aware of the market forces at work in the production, exchange, and consumption of religious ideas and practices. Not only was he aware of the underlying market forces at work in religious production and consumption but he made ample use of these forces in his attempt to revive Vaishnavism and recruit followers to his way of thinking 120 years ago. In fact, Bhaktivinoda recognized what Peter Berger has argued, that “[t]he pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities. And at any rate a good deal of religious activity in this situation comes to be dominated by the logic of market economics.”⁶

In the 1890s Bhaktivinoda instituted a marketing program designed to rationalize, bureaucratize, systematize, and coordinate the missionary, proselytizing, and propagandistic activities of his new brand of Vaisnavism.⁷ The marketing program was, tellingly, called the *Nama Hatta* program. In Bengali, *hatta* means market and *nama* means name—thus, the new marketing program was directed at “the marketplace of the Name.”⁸

The *nama hatta* program was devised by Bhaktivinoda in order to rationalize and facilitate the proselytizing wing of his emerging institution. Challenged by British criticisms of Gaudiya Vaishnavism and buoyed by the success of his journal, *Sajjanatosani* and books, Bhaktivinoda developed a missionary strategy in the 1890s which he thought would help Gaudiya Vaishnavism flourish into the new century.

Bhaktivinoda began his campaign to promote a new strategy of proselytization in 1891. In that year, he devised a strategy of organizing the missionary efforts of his fledgling movement, proposing a new way of thinking about Vaishnava missionary organization. He wrote several articles from 1891-93 (which were later collected in a small tract) arguing in favor of organizing the missionary branch of his organization along the lines of a trading company.⁹ Bhaktivinoda proposed that the world of non-Vaishnavas be considered as a potential market, full of customers waiting to buy the spiritual goods that Gaudiya Vaishnavas had to offer. Bhaktivinoda recognized the power of marketing strategies in the realms of both organization and evangelization. He called his the potential market of souls to be evangelized, the marketplace of the Name or *nama hatta*.

The purpose of the *nama hatta* program was expressly to proselytize and evangelize on behalf of Vaishnavism. Taking his cues from Christian and Brah-

mo missionaries, Bhaktivinoda sought to develop a rational program of missionary outreach that might bring in predictable and efficient returns. In 1893 he published a famous tract (*Sri Sri Godruma Kalpatavi*) outlining his vision of a market-driven Vaishnavism. The small Bengali tract still circulates in ISKCON and Gaudiya Math circles in West Bengal today.¹⁰

The *Godruma Kalpatavi* and the Rationalization of the Religious Marketplace

Bhaktivinoda designed his marketing strategy to maximize the exposure of his brand to the public. His use of marketing metaphors with respect to the distribution side of the religious economy was particularly appropriate. He was quite right in claiming that temples and pilgrimage sites were good places to meet potential "buyers" of the Vaishnava dharma. His emphasis upon having both specified places for missionizing as well as wandering missionaries was, no doubt, reflective of things that he would have seen in and around Calcutta in the 1890s. There were many Christian and Brahmo missionaries present in Calcutta at the time. Bhaktivinoda would have seen them on the streets and he would have known that they traveled from village to village in search of souls to save. His recognition of this as a marketing strategy that his followers could employ represents an ingenious adaptation of colonial entrepreneurial thinking to a religious context.

Bhaktivinoda regarded the temple that he built in *Nabadvipa* to be the primary store for the selling of Krishna's Name. He invited "all persons locally or from foreign countries to become shop-keepers in their states or to become traveling salesmen. . . . Those interested [were to] write to Surabhi Kunj's chief preacher, giving details of name, address and desire to participate. One [would] get the authorization certificate as well as the merchandise of the chief trader. One must however follow the rules and regulations of the chief trader of the market."¹¹ Although the specifics of this program are unclear from Bhaktivinoda's *Kalpatavi* the results were published in *Sajjantosani* from the inception of the program. Bhaktivinoda and his chief deputies ran the program from Mayapura. They reported the activities of the missionaries who were working on their behalf in *Sajjanatosani*.

Although we do not know what the sales authorization certificate looked like, we do know that Bhaktivinoda insisted upon the proper credentialing of salesmen in the divine marketplace—or as we would call them, missionaries. The idea of certification is particularly interesting given the embattled status of Gaudiya

Vaishnavism in late-nineteenth century Bengal. Bhaktivinoda was well aware of the so-called "counterfeit" Vaishnavas who roamed from village to village in Bengal, pleading the name of Gauranga.¹² So he devised a way of credentialing Vaishnava missionaries. He does not go into detail regarding the credentialing process and one can reasonably assume that there was not much in the way of formal instruction or classes. Rather, Bhaktivinoda was the arbiter of who would be credentialed and who not. This provided a means of disciplining and rationalizing the missionary enterprise by creating a vetting process overseen by a very well-educated *bhadralok* guru.

Bhaktivinoda attempted to initiate a magazine that would publish the results of the missionary program that he began. Our only record of that magazine comes to us today through the pamphlet known as the *Kalpatavi*. In the *Kalpatavi* Bhaktivinoda mentions "inspection reports" conducted in 1892. He sought to oversee the *nama hatta* program in all its details. For example, he visited a temple (*mandir*) in Rampurnagar in the district of Hooghly. He reported that there was one traveling salesman who was associated with the temple, a man named Krishnakishor Goswami. In Ghatal in Medinipur he visited the head of a *Harisabha* (lay Vaishnava organization) and led the group in a *sankirtan* procession to attract recruits. In the village of Srinagar he spoke to two thousand assembled devotees, urging them to carry on with the program and sell the Holy Name (i.e. make converts).

In the thirty-five page *Kalpatavi* Bhaktivinoda enumerates many of the missionary activities that he oversaw in the 1890s. His role was to organize and rally the troops. He made regular visits to different ashrams and temples and *harisabhas* so that he could inspire missionaries and make sure that they were acting in accordance with the ideas about Vaishnavism that he set forth in his journal and books. Bhaktivinoda explicitly laid out the qualifications and disqualifications of a Vaishnava missionary.

A missionary (salesman) could be from any caste—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, or lower. He could be in any stage of life: Sannyasi, Brahmacari, Grihastha, Vanaprastha; as long as he was a pure devotee he could sell the Holy Name. In order to be pure he had to eradicate material desire and become free of the passion to acquire knowledge (*jnana*) or to try to achieve liberation through non-devotional activities (*karma*). Devotion to Krishna was all that was really necessary.

Disqualifications for participation in the marketplace of the Name included being selfish, lazy, materialistic, irreligious, atheistic, passionless, interested in useless speculation and argumentation, ambitiousness, eagerness to obtain *mukti*, being full of sorrow, illusion, anger, greed, fear, intoxication, etc. Bhakti-

vinoda argued that a man's previous life should not be considered when deciding whether or not he was suitable for missionary work; rather, his present disposition was all that mattered.

Men could be married. According to Bhaktivinoda, a married man was first a Vaishnava and a *grihastha* (householder) second. The only sexual sin for a householder was to engage in unrestricted sexual activity with a prostitute or a woman other than his wife. Brahmacharis and Sannyasis were strictly forbidden from having sex at all.

According to Bhaktivinoda, those missionaries who sought to give the Name for some kind of material benefit (i.e., self-promotion, aggrandizement, power, etc.) were disqualified and to be removed from the missionary ranks. The only exceptions to this rule were *gurus* who accepted voluntary offerings from a householder for the benefit of his spiritual life.

Women were allowed to become "saleswomen" in Bhaktivinoda's *nama hatta* program. But their access was to be restricted to other women. In Bhaktivinoda's system, a woman could distribute the Holy Name to another woman but not to a man. The only exception to this rule would be when, at extraordinary times and in exceptional places and circumstances "with great care and caution, mature women [could] distribute the name to men."¹³ On the other side of the equation, male preachers were to avoid contact with women and let the female preachers do the missionary work of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. "Apart from elderly women or very young girls, men preachers should avoid discussion with women."¹⁴

Bhaktivinoda argued that his missionaries should feed themselves well and be willing to take any sorts of medicines or treatments which might keep their body healthy. Physical well-being was essential to missionary work according to Bhaktivinoda. So, too, preachers were to maintain themselves through honorable means. Those householders who were capable of work were forbidden by Bhaktivinoda from begging. In general, a Vaishnava preacher should abide by the rules of the particular *ashrama* or stage-of-life in which he found himself. Vehicles, umbrellas, walking staffs, etc. were to be used if they furthered the mission of spreading the Vaishnava *dharma*.

A missionary was to follow standard Hindu protocols regarding cleanliness and sanitation in toiletry habits. The missionaries were encouraged to wear traditional Vaishnava clothing with *tulasi* beads in their hands and the twelve *tilak* markings on their bodies. A Vaishnava missionary was to always be seen in public chanting the Name of God and he should always introduce himself as the "humble servant of their Lordships Sri Sri Gauranga, Nityananda, Advaita, Gadadhara, and Srivasa."¹⁵ The main attribute of a Vaishnava missionary was humility.

Preaching activities were to be accompanied by dancing and singing. Bhaktivinoda recommended that his missionaries use drums and cymbals while chanting and recounting the stories of the Lord's pastimes to potential converts. "The music and tune should have an effect on the hearts of the listeners similar to the action of borax in the melting of gold. It is good to express one's feelings for the Lord through song and dance according to one's natural rising of transcendental emotions. The behavior of irreligious people in displaying these emotions is not required. It should be avoided."¹⁶

The main thing to be avoided by all missionaries was the preaching of *maya-vadi* (non-dualistic atheism) confusion to potential converts. The *margas* (paths) of *jnana* and *karma* were to be assiduously avoided. Preachers were to ensure that converts did not go down the path of dry renunciation and meaningless privation. Bhaktivinoda noted that there were other salespeople in the marketplace who sold *jnana* and *karma*. "Apart from [our] employees there are other pious aspirants, such as *Bhats*, *Fakirs*, *Bauls*, and others who are seen in the marketplace of the Name. These people have the right to perform their own fruitive activities, and benefit from the association of the *Nama Hatta* [missionaries]. However Nityananda Prabhu is not responsible for whatever they lack in the pure standard."¹⁷

The last section of *Sri Sri Godruma Kalpatavi* consists of a listing of the various missionary activities of Bhaktivinoda's followers over the course of a year or so in 1892-93. Bhaktivinoda encouraged his followers to send in any information pertaining to missionary activities in the countryside. He labeled himself the sweeper of the market and defended his position this way: "As the sweeper daily cleans the market, he finds scattered letters here and there. Whatever he finds written in those letters he gives to the *saharatdara* [publisher] to broadcast. Because [all] information comes from the sweeper, the *saharatdara* sings the sweeper's name at the time of publishing."¹⁸

It is interesting to note that, among all of the players in the conceptual marketplace that he invented, Bhaktivinoda identified himself in the *Kalpatavi* as the *parimarjaka* or the "sweeper" of the marketplace. The title is telling. On the one hand the assumption of such a lowly position was in keeping with traditional Vaishnava values of humility. Bhaktivinoda, by assuming the role of a lowly sweeper in the divine marketplace, placed himself in a very humbling position. To accept the role of sweeper is to allow oneself to be identified with the dust and dirt and filth, the most impure aspects of any public space. No doubt, Bhaktivinoda had this in mind when he declared himself the *parimarjaka* of the *nama hatta* program. Bhaktivinoda referred to himself as the *Sri Sri Nama Hatta Parimarjaka*—the fallen worthless servant.

But there is more significance to the term than just that of one willing to identify with the low and humble. The sweeper of the marketplace is the one who cleans the marketplace. He makes it pure and presentable for customers. This is, no doubt, the way that Bhaktivinoda saw himself and his role as a Vaishnava reformer.

Conclusion—*The Sweeper of the Religious Marketplace*

The ultimate question is this: What would make someone like Bhaktivinoda conceptualize the religious situation in late nineteenth-century Bengal as a marketplace? Was it simply the attempt of an indigenous thinker to resist British economic dominance by playfully appropriating their symbol systems—thus emptying them of their meaning? Or was something else at play in Bhaktivinoda's assertion that colonial India should be seen as a spiritual marketplace?

I would argue that Bhaktivinoda's use of market metaphors represented not simply an ironic emptying out of the meaning of the material marketplace—a la the playfulness of *kartabhaja* appropriations. Rather, it demonstrated a recognition and application of the logic of economic principles to the religious realm of cultural production. Bhaktivinoda used the idea of the spiritual marketplace as a root metaphor for organizing his religious activities.

The “market” was a metaphor for the spiritual marketplace in general and the Vaishnava marketplace in particular. This dominant metaphor indicated that Bhaktivinoda understood the competitive nature of religious conversion, affiliation, and identification. His reconceptualization of Vaishnava missionary activity along the lines of a business enabled him to plant a seed of organizational development that led directly to the flourishing of Vaishnava missionaries in other market contexts both locally and globally in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Endnotes

1. See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958, p. xi; Cf. Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, New York: Oxford, 1997.

2. Cf. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York: Doubleday, 1967; Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*. Berkeley, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985; Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990; Maurice Bloch, *Ritual History and Power*, London: Berg Publishers, 1989; Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.

3. Cf. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 127-155, *passim*.

4. For critical examinations of the history and impact of the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 see: Richard Hughes Seager (ed.), *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions*, 1893, Chicago: Open Court, 1993; Eric J. Ziolkowski (ed.), *A Museum of Faiths: Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions*, Scholar's Press, 1993; Clay Lancaster, *The Incredible World's Parliament of Religions at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893: A Comparative and Critical Study*, Centaur Press, 1987; Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter*, Chicago, 1893, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

5. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 139.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

7. For a lucid discussion of Weber's well-known theory of rationalization and systematization in the modern context see Lewis Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, Second Edition, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, pp. 233-234. Cf. Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, New York: Vintage, 1968.

8. For the significance of the Holy Name in the Vaishnava tradition see *Jaiva Dharma*, pp. 407-410. For Gaudiya Vaishnavas there is no difference between the sound of the Lord's name and the Lord Himself. Thus the importance of the well-known *mahamantra*: "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare," where Krishna and Rama are names of the Lord and Hare represents the energy, power, and potency of the Lord. Cf. Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*, University of South Carolina Press, 1993.

9. Although Bhaktivinoda had been involved in Vaishnava missionary work since his days in Puri, he did not begin referring to his program as the *nama hatta* program until the 1890s. The majority of the reports about the *nama hatta* program in *Sajjanatosani* come from volumes 4 and 5 (1892-93).

10. Bhaktivinoda Thakura, *Sri Sri Godruma Kalpatavi*, Mayapur: Mayapur Chandrodaya Mandir, (1893) 1989. The dating for the original tract is ambiguous. The *Kalpatavi* was originally published as a magazine between 1891 and 1893. The original prints have been lost or are inaccessible. Internal evidence of modern editions suggests that the SSGK tract has to have been published after 1893 because references are made to activities up to that point.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

12. See Jason Fuller, "Suddha Vaisnavera Paricaya," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Volume 12, No. 1, Fall 2003, pp. 167-176.

13. *Kalpatavi*, p. 11.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 15.